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CULTURAL DEPRIVATION--IDEAS FOR ACTION.

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EDUCATING THE CULTURALLY DIFFERENT LEARNER COULD BE IMPROVED THROUGH ACTION PROGRAMS PARALLELED BY EXPERIMENTAL RESEARCH. THE IDENTIFICATION OF TRAITS AND ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS THAT REVERSE THE EFFECTS OF CULTURAL DEPRIVATION AND ALLOW INDIVIDUALS TO BREAK OUT FROM THEIR CULTURAL COCOONS AND THE PRESENTATION OF THE CURRICULUM TO THE CULTURALLY DIFFERENT LEARNER ARE TWO PROBLEMS NEEDING INVESTIGATION. BASIC LEARNING DEFICIENCIES AND PSYCHO-SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT NEEDS WHICH HANDICAP THE CULTURALLY DIFFERENT LEARNER SHOULD BE RECOGNIZED AND PROVIDED FOR. DIALECTICAL BARRIERS COULD BE CHECKED BY LINGUISTIC IMMERSION OR BY ALLOWING THE LEARNER MAXIMUM CONTACT WITH STANDARD AMERICAN ENGLISH SO HE COULD MASTER VOCABULARY, PRONUNCIATION, SYNTAX, AND IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS. LEVELS OF ASPIRATION AND CONCEPT OF SELF COULD BE RAISED BY CONSTANTLY REASSURING THE LEARNER OF HIS CAPACITY TO LEARN AND BY ALLOWING HIM SUCCESSES. KNOWLEDGE OF HIS EXPERIENTIAL BACKGROUND, VALUE SYSTEM, AND LINGUISTIC ORIENTATION IS AS SIGNIFICANT AS A CONTINUOUS ASSESSMENT OF HIS STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES, AND PROGRESS. EVENTUALLY, EVERY CULTURALLY DIFFERENT LEARNER COULD BE ABLE TO PARTICIPATE WITH DIGNITY, SELF-ACCEPTANCE, AND SELF-RESPECT. THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT THE INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE (SEATTLE, MAY 4-6, 1967). (NS)

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CULTURAL DEPRIVATION: IDEAS FOR ACTION

We who are comitted to education and to the other behavioral sciences are finding ourselves thrust into history in a way that has never before been true during the development of our various disciplines. No longer are we locked into the somewhat comfortable isolation of our little red school houses or our laboratories or our academic ivory towers. The urgency of shrinking space, of shrinking time, and of social revolution is nudging us with unrelenting persistence. And there is no turning back.

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Just a few years ago we suddenly discovered our "waster Americans" - discovered them or perhaps just dared - finally - to acknowledge their existence. With something like a royal decree, it was ordered that we declare war on poverty and on ignorance. And the Ignorant Ones came under microscopic scrutiny. We asked: "Who are 'these people'? What are they like? Why are they so different and disadvantaged? What are we to call them?"

It was probably inevitable that we should get involved in a semantic battle. We spoke of the "culturally deprived". Anyone who had not been exposed to the experiential and linguistic and value orientation of the normally advantaged segment of our population must indeed be deprived. However, cultural anthropologists argued that no one is truly deprived of a culture. He may simply have come from a culture different from the predominant one.

So the term "culturally deprived" became a dirty word and was supplanted by the term "culturally different". Yes, this was better, since it acknowledged the differences among cultures within an essentially heterogeneous society. However, the question was then raised: "Who is different from whom? Who represents the standard and who is the deviant? Is there not a value judgment implied in the term "culturally different?"

Although the terminology became increasingly confusing, the fact still remained: There were significantly large numbers of people within our society who grew up in sub-cultures that did not prepare them adequately to cope with academic achievement or with the work-a-day world. They were at a decided disadvantage in terms of coping skills. Hence, the term "culturally disadvantaged" came into prominence. However, this proliferation of terms continued with rather wild acceleration: "culturally deprived", "culturally different", "culturally disadvantaged", "culturally disabled", "culturally debilitated", "culturally disenfranchised", and even "culturally denuded".

This seemingly ridiculous semantic battle was probably a necessary first step in our attempts to define a rather involved psycho-social and educational problem. However, we were pressed into action as the availability of very tempting federal funds required that program plans be set down in proposals. Deadlines were upon us. And the psychology of crisis catapulted us into action with phenomenal speed.

As programs got underway and live bodies began to appear for help, the stark realities of cultural deprivation became increasingly apparent: Our American society had allowed many millions of its members to remain culturally isolated, locked in their own cultural cocoons, as it were, either by design or neglect. Thus sealed off from contact with the predominant culture, they grew up culturally different. Their self-concept frequently reflected the feelings of inferiority and rejection often characteristic of social outcasts. There was a tendency for them to feel that they had no significant stake in our society. Their experiences had been severely circumscribed and limited. Their linguistic isolation had resulted in their speaking either a markedly divergent dialect of American English or an entirely different language. Their repertoire of concepts tended to be both limited and highly specialized. And their value systems were likely to differ from and even to come into conflict with those of the predominant culture. It soon became apparent, therefore, that any effective attack on the problems of the culturally disadvantaged would have to be interdisciplinary. It would require creative intellectual pragmatism in the application of psychology, cultural anthropology, economics, sociology, linguistics, community development, medicine, and education. The task was a formidable one!

The war on poverty and ignorance within the United States was given further impetus by the fact that the culturally disenfranchised were themselves becoming increasingly aware of their plight and were articulating their discontent. They wanted to burst out of their cultural cocoons and participate with comfort, with dignity, and with effectiveness in the life, culture and mores of the general society. And this society, in turn, was beginning to recognize the expense of having the disadvantaged on its relief rolls, the wasted manpower resulting from the undereducation of the cultural isolates, and the immorality of denying them optimal self-fulfillment.

Against this backdrop, therefore, it becomes imperative that we generate ideas for action at a rapid rate. And it is the purpose of this paper to sketch broadly a few ideas that might be provocative, if not totally comprehensive. Action must occur in two major dimensions: First of all, intelligently conceived ideas must be programmed and implemented, even though they have not stood the acid test of rigorous experimentation. Time is of the essence. We have waited too long and we must get moving. In addition, action programs must be paralleled by more careful experimental investigations of the many variables that may reverse the effects of cultural deprivation. And the interaction that may exist among these variables must also be studied. Further, there must be maximum intercommunication and cross-fertilization between those working on the firing lines in the various programs and those who are doing the more controlled experimental investigations. Feedback from programs will provide significant hypotheses which the experimenters can test. And the findings from experimentation can, in turn, be applied in the action programs.

The Phenomenon of Spontaneous Acculturation

There are numerous examples around us of people who were born in cultural cocoons but who have broken out for no reason that is apparent. Unquestionably, some motivational factor has abrogated society's dictum that these people should be doomed to permanent cultural isolation. What could this factor be? Why, for example, might two siblings raised in essentially the same depressed environment differ in their tendency to break out of their cocoon? Is this emancipation based on innate intelligence or might it be some environmental influence that provided for the one a glimpse into a different world and thereby generated for him an elevated level of aspiration with concomitant increased self-confidence?

This phenomenon of spontaneous acculturation is intriguing and is certainly worthy of systematic investigation. Such research should involve the culling of case history and psychological test data from these "cultural breakouts". These data should then be treated with factor analysis in order to determine whether or not there is a cluster of traits or environmental influences common among those who break out of their various sub-cultures. If such factors can be isolated and identified, it might follow that we could devise systematically programmed cultural emancipation.

Informal investigations by this writer have failed to yield any consistent specific factor common to these "cultural breakouts". Generally, however, there seems frequently to be present some almost fortuitous incident or influence of another person that triggers a change in self-confidence and in goal-setting behavior that is aimed at a raised level of aspiration.

Modified Curriculum: Content or Methodology?

A number of educators look with considerable pessimism at the educational future of the culturally disadvantaged learner. Some feel that significant cultural difference is essentially immutable and that attempts to reverse the effects of this difference would therefore be futile: "Provide them with minimum requirements for some low-level vocation and then turn them loose." This same conclusion is also held by those who are convinced of the innate inferiority of members of the culturally disadvantaged segment of our society. Both points of view often lead to the contention that the curricular goals of educational programs for the disadvantaged should either be lowered or markedly changed.

I would challenge this contention with vigor. First of all, we must assume that good curricula in school systems across the nation embody a systematically sequenced complex of concepts that are regarded by educators as highly desireable for general life adjustment and necessary for employability in most occupations. If this point is tenable, then the already disadvantaged learner must not be deprived of this body of knowledge, lest his deprivation, his failure, his sense of worthlessness, and his economic dependence be perpetuated and even become the legacy of his offspring. This, I am afraid, has already been happening for many generations.

A second assumption held here is that innate intelligence or learning capacity is distributed within the culturally disadvantaged group in the same way that it is distributed within the general American popu-

lation. It would therefore follow, of course, that the mean IQ for both groups would be 100 and that genius, normalcy, and mental deficiency exist to the same degree among the culturally advantaged and the culturally disadvantaged. To this we might add the assumption that difference in measured IQ's reflect the inappropriateness and inaccuracy of our measuring instruments when used with subjects who are culturally different from the dominant population; and that the disproportionately high degree of academic underachievement reflects the failure of our schools still to present the curriculum in a way that is palatable and campatible with the unique background, learning style, and cluster of characteristics of the disadvantaged.

If we assume, therefore, that the acquisition of our curriculum content is desirable and that culturally disadvantaged students have normal learning capacity, then we are faced with the exciting challenge of modifying our approach rather than our curriculum content in presenting the skills and concepts that are traditionally a part of our academic diet. This is indeed the crucial task confronting educators of the culturally disadvantaged. And both experimental research and action programs must be directed to the accomplishment of this task.

I have identified elsewhere a number of specific differences or deficiencies that are likely to handicap the disadvantaged learner and militate against his academic achievement.[1] These fell into two major

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[1]Edwards, Thomas J. "Learning Problems in Cultural Deprivation," Reading and Inquiry, International Reading Association Conference Proceedings, Volumn 10 Newark, Delaware: 1965.

categories: basic learning deficiencies and psycho-social adjustment needs. The modification of our approach to the education of the culturally-disadvantaged should take these kinds of factors into consideration. If, for example, disadvantaged students are likely to have a deficient repertoire of concepts, we should be sensitive, alert, and constantly diagnostic..In this way we can recognize and provide for any deficiencies in the conceptual elements that may be prerequisite to the learning of a new, more advanced, more complex or more abstract concept. How, for instance, can a student grasp world geography if he does not have the more fundamental concepts of "east", "west", "north", and "south"?

Similarly, if a student's own achievement expectancy and his self-concept are inadequate, it follows logically that he should be given rather constant reassurance of his learning ability and also be provided with success-insured tasks.

In addition, we may need to know a great deal about the unique experiential-conceptual background, the value system, and the linguistic orientation of the disadvantaged student and adjust our pedagogy in a way that will prevent his unique characteristics from hampering his mastery of the curriculum.

Dialectical Barriers to Learning

Linguistically, we in the United States are not homogeneous. So-called standard American English or "network English" is spoken by only a small minority of Americans. And even the perfectably acceptable English of one region of the United States will differ considerably from that

of another region. These regional differences in standards of speech generally do not tend to interfere with academic achievement; nor do they usually hamper inter-regional communication.

Because the majority of culturally disadvantaged students have grown up in linguistic cocoons, their isolation from standard American English has resulted in their speaking dialects that differ even from the standard acceptable English of their own regions. In certain cases, as is true, for example, of Americans of Spanish descent or many American Indians, even an entirely different language may be spoken. Dialectical variations from standard English tend to fall into four major categories: vocabulary, pronunciation, syntax, and idiomatic expression. And significant divergence in any of these four categories may seriously penalize a linguistically different student in the school setting.

Ultimately, the educative process involves the communication of a myriad of concepts to learners. These concepts comprise our curriculum content. Communication, in turn, relies very heavily upon language. In the acquisition of concepts, the learner must have proficiency in the receptive aspects of communication; that is, listening and reading. On the other hand, when he wants to react, to question, or to demonstrate that learning has taken place, he must rely on expressive communication: speaking and writing.

When a learner moves from the familiar dialect of his own linguistic cocoon to the somewhat unfamiliar language of the school, the communicative process often tends to be seriously impaired. This, in turn, is quite likely

to penalize him in his attempts to acquire the concepts embodied in the curriculum. And even if he is reasonably successful in understanding these concepts, he might be at a loss in communicating the fact that he does understand them if his expressive language skills are deficient as they relate to standard American English. This language barrier is also one of the factors that make it difficult for intelligence tests to measure the learning capacity of culturally different students. This is true because language is often one of the fundamental means by which intelligence is assessed.

What, then, must be done in order to arm linguistically different students with the essential communication skills prerequisite to academic achievement?

One answer is linguistic immersion. The school must make every effort to provide the student with maximum meaningful contact with the standard American English of his region. He should hear a great deal of standard language in order to develop receptive communication proficiency. And he should use the language for the development of competence in expressive communication.

Students who grow up in linguistic isolation learn to master both the speech sound system and the syntax of their peculiar dialect. When they encounter standard American English, they find themselves suddenly faced with sounds that they have never become accustomed to perceiving or reproducing. And the perception and reproduction of speech sounds are learned acts. The dialectical pronunciations come into conflict with the more conventional standards and interference results.

According to Johnson, ". . . the language of culturally disadvantaged pupils should be considered as a different system that interferes - systematically - with the learning of standard English." And he proceeds to identify characteristic points of conflict between the American Negro dialect and standard American English on which instructional emphasis should be placed. He also suggests specific kinds of instructional activities which can be employed.[2]

Conflicts among systems of arranging words into syntactical patterns also present problems for disadvantaged learners and syntax is probably as much a fixed language habit as auditory perception and pronunciation. These habits are learned early and are difficult to modify. It is often felt that the various dialects of American English are haphazard and unsystematic. However, careful analysis of non-standard speech have shown that dialects tend to be both systematic and consistent.[3,4]

In all probability, initial emphasis in language re-training should be at the oral level. First of all, language is learned naturally at the auditory-vocomotor level before written language is ever attempted. In addition, printed symbols are representations of spoken language and should therefore follow the learning of spoken language in the sequence of language development. Any attempts to learn symbols for sounds that have never been mastered at the auditory level would be psychologically and pedagogically unsound.

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[2]Johnson, Kenneth R. "Improving the Language Skills of the Culturally Disadvantaged," Teaching Culturally Disadvantaged Pupils. Chicago: Science Research Associates, Inc., 1967.

[3]McDavid, Raven I., Jr. "The Dialects of American English," in Francis, W. Nelson. The Structure of American English. New York: The Ronald Press, 1958.

[4]Stewart, William A. (ed). Non-Standard Speech and the Teaching of English. Washington, D.C: The Center for Applied Linguistics, 1964.

A culturally different student might question very seriously the school's attempts to change his language habits. And justifiably so. His dialect has served him well. He has communicated with it effectively all of his life and has shared it with others as an integral aspect of his unique cultura. So, why change? First of all, he should not be encouraged to discard or reject his familiar dialect. Rather, he should strive for linguistic versatility so that he can slide easily and comfortably up and down a language continuum from his own dialect to slang to colloquialisms to more formal standard American English. And he should know in which situations each type of language is appropriate. Standard American English is the lingua franca of the United States and therefore provides the relatively uniform and stable system for communication. In addition, marked deviations from linguistic norms tend to stigmatize a person as being uneducated or outlandish. These points should be made clear to culturally disadvantaged students, particularly since their cultural or ethnic difference will in all probability have already been a source of derision or rejection or humiliation once they have ventured outside their own cultural milieu.

A number of practical techniques can be employed to help students add standard American English to their native dialect. Plays, the memorization of interesting poems or even nonsense ditties, songs, and impromptu dialogue all may prove to be helpful. The important consideration is the hearing and reproduction of the pronunciations and the syntactical structures of standard American English. Because there are numerous dialects represented among the various disadvantaged sub-cultures, it is essential that a teacher listen for frequently recurring deviations from standard English and plan language-learning activities around these deviations.

Language immersion must not be viewed as an isolated curricular area. Rather, it must be woven systematically into a thoroughly integrated program designed to expand students' repertoires of concepts and the cognitive power and reasoning ability with which to manipulate these concepts logically and creatively. This is education.

Self-Concept and Cultural Disadvantage

A person who either peeks out or dares to move out of his cultural cocoon becomes immediately aware of the fact that he is "different". He is a deviant from the acceptable dominant group that enjoys a special place in the societal sun. And his awareness of his difference may be underscored by derisive labels that are hurled at him or by various verbal or graphic caricatures designed to ridicule him. He is often a social outcast.

In his attempts to ease even unobtrusively into the mainstream of general American life, he often encounters a school situation designed for students from quite different backgrounds. Failure ensues and he learns quickly not to expect much of himself by way of school achievement. As a chronic academic failure, he first becomes a psychological dropout at an early age. However, he is required to remain in school until he is old enough to become a physical dropout.

By early adulthood he has already learned to lower his level of aspiration and to adjust his specific goal-setting accordingly. He may give up and get on the relief rolls or possibly settle for an unskilled menial job. On the other hand, he may still have salvaged enough ego

strength to compete in the job arena. However, in all probability his background will not have provided him with the myriad of language, conceptual, and technical capabilities necessary to compete effectively for a job. This kind of continuous failure might ultimately drive a culturally disadvantaged person to one of two extremes: he may either give up and withdraw into the comfort of his familiar cultural cocoon and settle for effortless, simple hedonism; or he may lash out in bitterness against a hostile society that refuses him admittance.

What is to be done to salvage culturally disadvantaged Americans who might otherwise be headed toward psychological, social, and economic destitution? Again, we need the combined efforts of both experimental investigators and professionals involved in action programs. Unquestionably, the most advantageous starting point is early childhood. At that stage, a negative self-concept is not likely to have developed with any degree of permanence. Also, experiential, conceptual, linguistic, and cognitive versatility can be achieved more easily if hardening of the learning arteries has not yet set in. This need to start at an early age underscores the tremendous importance of the Operation Headstart concept.

Professionals and para-professionals working with the disadvantaged must be helped by either pre- or in-service training to understand the social and psychological dynamics that create the profile of destitution described above. They must become trained observers of the behavioral patterns of the culturally disadvantaged. And they must learn to devise, administer and interpret both informal and standardized testing instruments in order to make valid assessments of coping skills and deficiencies.

Needless to say, a healthy self-concept can not develop within a vacuum. Hence, detailed but flexible program guidelines must be formulated to assist in arresting or reversing the deleterious effects of cultural deprivation on human personality adjustment. We must pin-point the attitudinal traits and the cognitive skills that are prerequisite to success in handling traditional curricula. These, in turn, must be woven into a program that is palatable, stimulating, challenging, success-yielding, and relevant to academic achievement and to general life adjustment. Both within the school and within the larger community, provision must be made to secure older models whom culturally disadvantaged youths can emulate and who can provide these youths with encouragement and specific help. In the school, this model role could be performed either by a teacher or by an older, sympathetic, and more advantaged student. Within the community, organizations such as Big Brothers of America could perform this function very effectively.

Concluding Comment: Cultural Symbiosis and Synthesis

In conclusion, one central principle deserves reiteration here: An all-out, multi-faceted attack must be waged if we are to salvage youngsters who are disadvantaged because of cultural difference and if we are to assist them in realizing optimal self-fulfillment. Such an attack will require careful and continuous assessment of their strengths, their weaknesses, and their progress. Programming must provide for the development of skills and concepts as well as for the expansion of their cognitive power. And all of this must be done in a setting that is conducive to the growth of a healthy self-image.

At long last, we may now be moving toward a new society in which no one will be at a disadvantage because of his identification with a special sub-culture. Hopefully, we are creating a generation of <u>cultural straddlers</u> - individuals who can participate with equal ease and comfort both in their own sub-cultures and in a common general American culture. Our goal must <u>not</u> be the eradication of the richness of our diversification in favor of a bland and colorless homogeniety. Rather, we can indeed enjoy cultural symbiosis and synthesis simultaneously. Our sub-cultures may remain essentially intact but not as cultural cocoons. As they exist side by side, there must be a healthy fluidity of communication and true cross-fertilization. From this kind of cultural reciprocity there can develop a synthesis that will become a super-culture in which we can all participate with dignity, with self-acceptance, and with mutual respect.